

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE



Enduring Questions
Institution: Earlham College



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DIVISION OF EDUCATION
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National Endowment for the Humanities Division of Education Programs

Excerpt from a Successful Application

This excerpt from a grant application is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with staff members in the NEH Division of Education Programs well before a grant deadline. The excerpt does not include a budget or résumé.

Project Title: On Human Dignity

Institution: Earlham College

Project Director: Vincent Punzo

Grant Program: Enduring Questions Course Grants

On Human Dignity

Intellectual Rationale and Teaching Value

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which begins with the assertion that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. . .” But what exactly is meant by the notion of inherent human dignity? Through the centuries the meaning and relevance of the concept of human dignity has been debated by philosophers, psychologists, and theologians. It has found creative expression in the works and lives of writers, artists, and musicians, who, some believe, embody the concept in their work as well as through the practice of their craft. But human dignity cannot solely be understood as an abstract concept divorced from the lived reality of particular lives other than scholars and artisans. It is not uncommon for individuals who are confronted by complex moral choices, or beset by sorrow and loss, to express the hope that they retain, or even more fully express, their human dignity. Nevertheless, the precise meaning, value, and content of this term remain elusive and clouded in obscurity for most of us. It is, rather paradoxically, a concept that is better felt than understood. And yet with increasing sophisticated advances in technology, coupled with the increasing awareness of the complexity and mysteries of the natural world, the question of the reality of a unique human dignity becomes more pressing, and perhaps more difficult to answer.

The purpose of this course will be to provide students an opportunity to engage in readings and discussions exploring the meaning, value, significance, and utility of the notion of human dignity. Specifically, readings and discussions will lead students to grapple with the many questions and problems posed by the notion of human dignity: What does the term mean? Does a

belief in the dignity of human life presuppose a theistic worldview? Can one's dignity be compromised by the harsh blows of life, stripped by oppressive societal forces, or squandered by poor moral choices? Do human attributes of race, class, and gender effect how it is experienced, expressed, or ascribed to others? Is human dignity a useful concept for framing moral choices in one's life?

In keeping with the "pre-disciplinary" nature of the question of human dignity, course readings will be drawn from a variety of perspectives. The first section of the course will focus on the lived experience of human dignity. Students will read both fiction and non-fiction portrayals of individuals who manifest, or embody the struggle for, dignity. The focus of the second section of the course will be more conceptual as students engage works of philosophy and psychology directly addressing the notion of human dignity. The required reading list will be as follows (each work will be read in its entirety unless otherwise noted).

- *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles. The cause of a horrific plague, Oedipus discovers, turns out to be himself. What dignity is possible for us in a world where we cannot know all there is to know about ourselves, and yet where we must act?
- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass. This work portrays both the author's emerging awareness of his own dignity as well as his insights into the corrosive effects on a slaveholder's dignity brought about by participation in fundamental injustice.
- *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin. Is Edna's act at the end of the novel a defiant expression of autonomy which salvages her dignity from oppressive social forces? Or is it an act of despair? Is Chopin suggesting that dignity is dependent upon self-rule and autonomy?

- *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Is dignity a relevant, or meaningful, concept in the midst of oppressive, dehumanizing conditions in which one is simply struggling to survive?
- *Letters from a Stoic*, Lucius Seneca. Seneca articulates a view of the nobility of human rationality and rectitude that seems to equate human dignity with right action. How does this view confirm, or contradict, the experiences portrayed in the first four readings?
- *Pensees*, Blaise Pascal (significant sections, approximately 1/3 of the text). Pascal's view of human dignity is grounded in a religious world view that contains elements of both Seneca's lofty view of human rationality and Sophocles' pessimistic view of human depravity. Is Pascal's view fundamentally contradictory or does he successfully reconcile these apparently disparate views?
- *Lectures on Ethics*, Immanuel Kant. (two selections: "Proper Self-Respect" and "Duties to Oneself") In these lectures Kant argues that the inner worth of an individual is dependent upon meeting self-regarding duties. What are our self-regarding duties and how does a failure to fulfill them impact our dignity? Which of the figures from the earlier readings succeeded, or failed, in their self-regarding duties?
- *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, B.F. Skinner. Skinner argues that metaphysical constructs such as freedom and human dignity are not only superfluous, but quite detrimental, to advancing a scientific understanding of human behavior. Is Skinner's view completely at odds with the other authors studied in the course or do earlier course readings contain intimations of his view?
- *Thirst*, Mary Oliver. Students will no doubt be struck by the jarring contrast between the scientific rationalism of Skinner and the lyrical subjectivism of Oliver. But Oliver's

poems which depict the author's encounter with infirmity, loss, sorrow, and the ephemeral nature of her own existence will provide students with a fitting conclusion to a course on human dignity.

Addendum: The films "The Elephant Man" and "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" will be shown in their entirety outside of class time as a required class activity. Both movies depict the struggle for a sense of dignity in the face of physical affliction and intractable suffering.

Envisioned Course Design

"On Human Dignity" will be a first year discussion based seminar course limited to 16 students and will fulfill a general education requirement. The course structure, format, and assignments are modeled on other interdisciplinary courses I have taught in recent years. In both class discussions and written assignments, students will be encouraged to reflect on, and articulate, their own beliefs and experiences as they relate to class topics and readings.

Assignments. Students will write a total of six papers in this course. The papers will arise from, and further extend, the discussions that have taken place in the classroom on a particular reading. The final paper will be entitled "On Human Dignity." In this 8 to 10 page paper students will draw from at least three of the texts covered in class and attempt an integrative analysis of the meaning and problems of human dignity.

Student conferences. Each student will be required to meet individually with me at least three times during the course of the semester. These meetings will provide each student the opportunity for more sustained conversations about course material in ways not always possible in the classroom setting.

Course assessment. At the mid-point, and again at the end of the semester students will be asked to evaluate the course content, discussions, the professors' contributions as well as their

own performance. In the summer months, I will meet with a small group of colleagues who participated in the “Studies in Human Existence Workshop.” With the information gathered from the student evaluations, my own reflections, and discussions with colleagues, the course will be modified for the second year.

Project Director

I am a developmental psychologist with significant experience in teaching interdisciplinary courses that focus on enduring questions of human existence. In recent years I have developed two such courses “The Search for Self, Meaning, and Goodness” and “Love, Faith, and Friendship.” In both of these courses the required readings include classical philosophy, modern psychological research, and contemporary fiction. I also teach psychology and education courses (Human Development, Moral Education, Positive Psychology, History of Psychology) that explicitly address various perspectives on human nature. As a result of these experiences, I feel well-prepared for undertaking a course on the topic of human dignity.

The proposed course will be an extension of work I began earlier this year. In July, I led a faculty workshop entitled “Studies in Human Existence.” During this three day workshop twenty faculty members representing all divisions of the college gathered to discuss Anthony Kronman’s *Education’s End: Why Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*. Each faculty member described the ways in which he or she address questions of life’s meaning, value, and purpose in particular courses. The success of that workshop played a significant role in the development of this proposal. It is my hope that the proposed course will serve as a bridge between the workshop and the future planning of college-wide curricular change focused on enduring questions.

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